

The Importance of Access to Nature

Thoughts from David Yearsley-Founder, Friends of the Petaluma River

Access to wild places is as important to humans as it is to animals, but that access is becoming increasingly difficult to find and maintain. As we humans continue to develop the world around us for our convenience via buildings, roads, and other infrastructure, we insulate ourselves from the world of nature ---the world from which life springs. Through our industry we insulate and elevate ourselves from the earth with layers of concrete, steel, and other manufactured materials. It is becoming harder and harder to access the natural world due to these man-made barriers. Can this be healthy for us as individuals or as a species? I don't think so. Not only do our spirits suffer through lack of grounding, but we are losing sight of how important the natural world is to our future.

Gone are the days of daily contact with the earth that was enjoyed by our agrarian ancestors. It is increasingly difficult in our modern world to access nature, especially the untamed areas. Often our parks are created for use as athletic fields, golf courses, and playgrounds. Our rivers are dammed and channeled to provide reservoirs and flood control. Finding places to experience the wild side of nature has become the realm of the adventurous and the hardy: hunters, fishermen, hikers and campers. This need for experiencing the wild side of nature has created a niche for companies selling adventure travel. What is the result of reducing regular access to natural areas? Are we losing touch with the beauty and wonder of nature and in the danger of losing our desire to appreciate and protect wild areas? I hope not. Friends of the Petaluma River is dedicated to Celebrating and Conserving the natural wonders on our watershed and giving people the tools and knowledge to explore and enjoy them.

Fortunately we are not alone in our efforts. Many folks who have experienced the wild have led efforts to protect it. Hunters helped to form groups like Ducks Unlimited which, since 1937, has worked to purchase and protect over 10-million acres of wetlands. Fishermen founded organizations such as Trout Unlimited and United Anglers to protect and restore marine environments. The Sierra Club and Audubon Society, inspired by visionary hikers, explorers and naturalists, have helped to preserve large portions of our finest wilderness, wetlands and countless natural treasures. What is the one thing these groups have in common? They were all formed and supported by people who made the effort to get intimately acquainted with their natural world. They sought out wilderness and wildlife, and through their experiences appreciated the uniqueness and importance of nourishing the human spirit by connecting with nature. I feel it is imperative that those of us who have had the good fortune to experience the blessings of the natural world must work to pass this knowledge on to others, especially to the young. Without this passing of the flame, how will we kindle the fires for the future? If future generations ignore our conservation and preservation efforts, all that we have achieved will be in vain.

We are in a wonderful position to foster the love of nature in a grand way with the creation of the Petaluma River Heritage Center; a place to highlight the natural wonders of our watershed and host interactive programs that will put people in touch with them. It will not only be a gift to the community, but an investment in the future. By

creating a place for people to experience a “wild”, which is easily accessible and naturally appealing, we have the opportunity to expose and educate people to the River’s and wetland’s beauty and value.

Exposure to beauty often generates awe and reverence. Those feelings combined with knowledge tend to instill a desire to protect and promote habitat. The more we learn about something, the more we come to appreciate it. A damp, slimy, inhospitable marsh becomes a beautiful and abundant wetland to someone who has taken the time and initiative to understand it. Just as most people find the thought of harming a child repugnant, so too should be the thought of damaging a natural setting once the understanding of beauty, and value is established. The founders of Friends of the Petaluma River and the Petaluma River Heritage Center share my beliefs.

I think it is important to draw people into nature and provide them with the proper tools for understanding and appreciating it. Our River Heritage Center will be a wonderful setting for this experience. It will help to generate an awareness and appreciation of the Watershed’s special gifts, which I hope will foster a desire to use, care for and protect them. The access, understanding, and appreciation cycle is a crucial link in creating conservationists for the future.